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ABSTRACT

Although it is estimated that half of all women will experience some form of domestic abuse during their lifetimes, participant recruitment in studies to learn about such abuse is difficult. The first step for the researcher is to develop a collaborative community partnership with domestic violence services. This will provide first-hand knowledge of battered women's experiences. This paper details one graduate student's personal experiences in undertaking such a research project about battered women and their needs. Several suggestions are provided on how to enlist the women in the project; how to reimburse them for their time; how to meet them at their level and not overburden them with detailed questionnaires; how to maintain their confidentiality; and how to provide them with the support they need. (JDM)

Graduate research with women survivors of domestic violence

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Note. This paper is presented as part of a symposium entitled "Moving into our communities: Collaborative efforts in graduate research" (McWhirter, B., Chair), during the annual convention of the American Psychological Association, August 2001, San Francisco, CA. Correspondence regarding this paper should be directed to Krista M. Gragg, 5251 University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403.

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Imagine a woman who wants to participate in your study, but she is too ashamed to call and identify herself as a battered woman. Imagine a woman who has incurred so many injuries in her abusive relationship that completing only 1 of your 8 questionnaires takes her an hour. Imagine your first appointment with staff members of the shelter in which you'd like to conduct research. They speak mostly about their frustrations with researchers' unfulfilled promises to "help women." This morning I would like to share what I have learned from my experiences as a graduate student conducting community intervention research with women survivors of domestic violence. I'd like to address participant recruitment and retention, building collaborative community partnerships, and assessment.

Although it is estimated that half of all women will experience some form of domestic abuse during their lifetimes (Koss, 1994), participant recruitment may still be difficult. Women may feel too ashamed to come forward or too intimidated to meet with you. They may question your credibility and the purpose of your research, or fear the conclusions you will make about them. A first step to addressing these issues is to form a collaborative community partnership - a partnership with an agency that serves as your primary partner and if possible, additional supporting community agencies. Collaborative research partnerships, with a domestic violence services or counseling agency, may provide you with first-hand knowledge of battered women's experiences, the consultation services of experienced staff, resources such as building space, participant referrals, and credibility. Each of these factors enhances the likelihood that women will follow-up with a referral and call to participate in your study.

Collaborative community partnerships may be difficult to begin as a graduate student, however, especially if you are not from the community where you attend graduate school. I found it helpful to begin these relationships by volunteering with community agencies or

choosing practicum and externship sites where I wanted to conduct future research. As a volunteer or intern, it was important for me to listen to women's experiences, observe how services were provided, and discover what resources the community did and did not provide. During these experiences, I tried to invest myself personally as well as professionally. Remember names, ask questions, and invest your time learning about the agency's philosophy and purpose. Ask women and staff members for their input and critique of your ideas. Keep connected with the agency by offering your services in exchange for their resources. You might assist with staff training sessions or work a few hours every week on a crisis line. This give-and-take process keeps us in touch with women in our community and creates for us a context in which women are surviving domestic violence. Ultimately, we better serve our community because we are a part of it.

Of course, recruitment and retention extends far beyond participant referrals. Women need resources and services and in my experience, participant recruitment and retention was more successful if women were paid. While paying participants poses threats to external validity, the amount of money you offer and how you distribute this money can help minimize these threats. First, consider your payment schedule. If you offer women all of the money at the beginning of their participation, you may attract participants who are more in need of the money than interested in your services. If you offer women all of the money at the end of their participation, there is greater risk of attrition. Women will likely need money to defer the costs of bus fare, gas, or parking for research-related activities. Receiving a small amount of money as they participate in your study might serve as a much-needed resource as well as an incentive to participate.

More money is not necessarily better. Consider welfare laws that require women to report your research money against their income if over a certain amount. Pay women with cash and not checks. Many survivors no longer have checking accounts because their abusive partners control all finances. Provide on-site daycare; hold research activities in a secure area that is near a bus line; be willing to answer personal questions about your interest in domestic violence; and make reminder phone calls about up-coming research activities. These women's lives are chaotic. Their continued research participation might be strongly influenced by the little things you do.

So, how do you get all of these resources? Allot yourself a significant amount of time for researching funding opportunities and completing the applications. Apply for any scholarship, government, or private foundation grant you might even think you have a chance at getting and apply at the beginning, middle, and end of your study. Some grants are retroactive. While waiting for the money to roll in, you might minimize your research expenses by asking community businesses to donate toys, food, and bus tokens. You may ask for materials and building space from churches, community centers, and schools. Utilize graduate and undergraduate research assistants to help with research-related activities such as group facilitation, childcare, and data entry. In return, students may register for research or practicum credits. Funding research requires as much of your time and attention as does conducting it.

Finally, I'd like to talk about assessment with women survivors of domestic violence. Women's emotional and physical states may be significantly impaired and variable. Many have incurred physical and emotional injuries including head trauma resulting in cognitive impairment or visual disabilities, and anxiety and stress related disorders. These emotional and physical states may impact how well a woman can read and understand your assessment instruments, how

she may react emotionally to sensitive questions, and how long she can sit still. You might think critically about how many variables you want to measure and how many questionnaires you want to administer in one setting, allot more time for women to complete your questionnaires, and take notes of women's reactions as they complete the assessment. This feedback will inform your re-construction of original questionnaires and modification of future assessment procedures. It is also important to thoroughly explain response confidentiality. Women may fear that you will report their responses to employers; women in same sex partnerships may fear being "outed"; women who are immigrants or whose partners are immigrants may fear you will report them to immigration services; or women may fear that their responses will be used to send their partners to jail. These assessment issues are not only to be considered with women survivors, but they are issues especially common for this population.

Community intervention research is detailed, hard work and it takes so much time. Endless energy and time are not resources readily available to many graduate students who are trying to complete coursework, gain clinical hours, and graduate within a decade. I know that it is possible, though, and I'm hoping that some of you chose to come today because you also believe in the possibilities. One of my mentors told me, "If you're doing your research right and really serving your community, you will feel like you receive more than you give." It is possible and it is worth it.